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Former Illinois governor George Ryan (R.) is living in a federal prison in western Indiana, convicted of racketeering, mail fraud, tax fraud, and lying to federal investigators.

Rep. Mark Kirk (R., Ill.) wants to make sure he stays there.

“George Ryan abused his public office and was convicted beyond a reasonable doubt by a jury,” Kirk tells National Review Online. “He should be released from prison the same way others are released - through the parole process. He should not be released as part of a political favor.”

Ryan, age 74, has served just 13 months out of his 78-month sentence. His troubles began 14 years ago with a fiery car crash. On Nov. 8, 1994, Ricardo Guzman was driving a semi-truck on Interstate 94 outside Milwaukee. As he drove, other truck drivers tried to warn Guzman on the CB that a metal assembly was dangling from the rear of his truck. Guzman, who barely spoke English, could not understand them. When the rear assembly finally came flying off and hit the pavement, it punctured the gas tank of a family's minivan. The vehicle burst into flames, killing the six children inside and badly burning their parents, the Rev. Scott Willis and his wife, Janet.

Guzman and hundreds of other unqualified applicants had obtained their truck licenses in Illinois by bribing officials who worked under then-Secretary of State George Ryan. But that wasn't clear at the time, and Ryan did a good job of keeping it that way: Months after Guzman's accident, Ryan fired or transferred most of the employees in his office's Inspector General department in order to quash the subsequent investigation.

The illegally licensed drivers had caused at least 55 accidents, including a 74-car pileup in California that killed two people and injured 51. As James Merriner recounts in his new political biography of Ryan, *The Man Who Emptied Death Row*, a total of eleven traffic deaths were attributable to the licenses fraudulently obtained from Ryan's office.

Much of the bribe money was funneled into Ryan's campaign coffers, and he was elected

governor in 1998. It wasn't until 2006 that Ryan was convicted on 18 federal counts, only some of which were related to the license scheme.

For years, Ryan had also been steering state business and leases to friends in exchange for cash and gifts, including trips to Jamaica, about which he lied to the FBI. Ryan spread his campaign's funds among his family members. He ran his and his allies' political campaigns on state time with state employees in state offices, and his aides shredded campaign records and wiped hard drives clean to cover it up. As Merriner recounts in detail, Ryan's friends were selling favors out of his office, including low-digit license plates, in exchange for campaign contributions. They shook down companies that did or sought business with the state, demanding to be hired as "consultants" for five- and six-figure amounts in exchange for little or no work.

Media have described Ryan as "unrepentant." He has never asked the Willis family for forgiveness or acknowledged his role in their children's deaths. He has never apologized to the voters of Illinois, two-thirds of whom oppose a Ryan pardon today, according to a recent poll. Merriner writes that "when Ryan was sentenced to prison in 2006, his friends said he still did not think he had done anything wrong."

After all, this was business as usual in Illinois, where a bipartisan coterie of crooked politicians known as "the Combine" has run both Chicago and Springfield for decades. U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald, an outsider, has been raining on their parade in the Northern District of Illinois since his 2001 appointment. Fitzgerald's prosecution not only of Ryan but also of other state and city officials from both parties has contributed mightily toward cleaning up a state whose politics remain filthy nonetheless.

Today, Ryan is seeking clemency from President Bush, and two of Illinois's top Democrats, Gov. Rod Blagojevich (D.), and Sen. Dick Durbin (D.), support the idea. Durbin has written to President Bush that Ryan "has lost his state pension benefits and a commutation will not restore them. He would emerge from prison facing economic uncertainty at an advanced stage of his life. For those who would argue that a commutation makes light of his crimes, it is clear that he has already paid a significant price and will continue to do so as long as he lives."

Kirk, a moderate Republican from Chicago's northern suburbs, scoffs at Durbin's language, which makes Ryan sound like a financially troubled Social Security recipient, rather than a criminal who is only in prison at such an advanced age because he succeeded in covering up

crimes for so long. Kirk is so eager to prevent a commutation of Ryan's sentence that he wrote his own letter, urging the president not to grant clemency.

Kirk wrote: "If we are to stop corruption at the highest levels and restore the public's trust, then this prisoner should serve as similar criminals who cannot hope that political favor can adjust their sentence. Today, as U.S. Attorney Fitzgerald investigates and prosecutes further allegations of public corruption in Springfield, I urge you not to embolden the corrupt and criminal by pardoning or commuting George Ryan's sentence."

Kirk acknowledges that such an anti-pardon letter from a congressman is rare, but he tells NRO that it was necessary under the circumstances.

"A pardon for George Ryan would be like firing Eliot Ness," Kirk says. "It would send a chilling message to Fitzgerald: You may work hundreds of hours on the case, you may go up against the best defense that Chicago machine money can buy, but we'll just let it all go. . . . Knowing the president and how few pardons he's granted, I hoped we could tip the balance and stop this one from happening."